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‘Lost school could mean decades of damage’

Lior Dattel

Many children may face long-term damage from losing a year of schooling, and this may translate to long-term economic damage, primarily to those from the lower classes. This is the central argument by education economist Nachum Balas in a position paper attached to a report by the Taub Center for Social Policy Studies in Israel. The report was published Wednesday.

“If we don’t improve the education system, we’ll lose an entire generation of children and our economic growth will be damaged for decades. We have to dramatically change how the education system works in order to limit the cumulative damage to students,” writes Balas.

He recommends a strategy that differs from the Education Ministry’s plan for reinstating schooling, and to adopt that strategy permanently even after the pandemic crisis

passes. The ministry’s plan – dividing classes into two and hiring teachers without any teaching background, while spending 4.2 billion shekels on acquiring computers over the course of the year – was a mistake, he says.

“The ministry’s plan meant the total loss of a school year for many children in grades 5 thorough 12, and increasing social gaps – at massive expense,” he says.

Balas cites research showing that children who suffered

from extended breaks from school wound up attending school for fewer years and did not go as far professionally or career wise.

“Children with a strong starting point generally overcome this damage. But the researchers agree that even summer vacation leads to a drop in academic accomplishments, and it’s more significant among children from a weak economic background.”

A study by consulting firm McKinsey in March 2020

found that the better quality the remote learning system in a given country, and the shorter the break from in-person schooling, the less the damage to students, Balas notes. The damage to low-income students is double, McKinsey’s study found.

“Given the conditions in Israel, in terms of infrastructure and economic and educational capabilities, remote learning could be a partial solution, maybe not even a bad one, for children from well-off sectors. However, it’s problematic and maybe even horrible for many children from weaker backgrounds.

“While local authorities, principals and teachers were successful at adapting local solutions, the Education Ministry’s success in terms of giving precise instructions and immediate assistance to schools was limited at best,” states Balas.

“The ministry’s main failure was not preparing a system for long-term education during a crisis that led to schools closing.”

He makes two suggestions as to how to renew schooling: Students learning in shifts, one group in the morning and the other in the afternoon; or permanently reducing class sizes. The second suggestion is much more efficient and should be implemented in any case, he says.

Balas recommends reducing class sizes by rearranging the responsibilities of existing teaching staff and by converting existing space at schools into classrooms, without significant hiring of new teachers.